

# THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

WEXNER GRADUATE FELLOWSHIP/DAVIDSON SCHOLARS PROGRAM ALUMNI INSTITUTE

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## AZKARAH FOR RABBI AARON PANKEN, z"l

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2019 | WGF ALUM WARREN BASS (CLASS 8)

Thank you. I'm honored to be here with you all, including Aaron's friends, students, and teachers. I'm Warren Bass, and I was a member of Aaron's Wexner class, along with Robin Axelrod and Nina Butler.

I know I'm supposed to have something profound to offer, but all I can really say is that Aaron Panken was the greatest friend you could have.

After Dickens died, one of his younger friends wrote to another, "In him I have lost all that I most highly revered and loved; and we are neither of us at an age...to be able to replace such losses."

I had originally heard of Aaron as the legendarily accomplished doctoral-student applicant who was going to doom the chances of anyone else applying to Wexner that year as a Ph.D. He was immediately impressive: friendly, charismatic, hilarious, poised and grown-up, with a commanding future in the rabbinate if he wanted it. He had a glamorous, witty wife named Lisa who ate fools for breakfast and adored her brilliant dork of a husband. He was the ripe old age of 30.

Aaron was no plaster saint. He wore khakis with pleats. He had a wicked wit, boundless curiosity, phenomenal erudition, and a mind that moved at racing, bracing speed. We sat in the back of the room laughing like Statler and Waldorf, and we were roommates at every Wexner institute throughout our four years on the fellowship. He flew me and Shaul Kelner down to Atlantic City to lose money at slots. Back then, the summer institute was held on Cape Cod, and I do think I can mention that I have vivid memories—Lord and Larry Moses forgive me—of sneaking off with Aaron to play some mild hooky. I do not think I can mention some of the lines for Beit Café skits that we wisely discarded.

Aaron and his family took me in, including making sure that a grad student from Toronto had something to do on Thanksgiving, or as it's referred to in Canada, Thursday. For me, Thanksgiving became Panksgiving, and I always loved the warmth of that celebration—of seeing his wonderful children, Eli and Samantha, grow up into such sensational adults, of forging a cherished friendship with the amazing Lisa.

Aaron was a magnificent mix of reverence and irreverence. He had a profound and spiritual Judaism that was endlessly nourishing to his soul and mind, but he was always quick with a one-liner that would land all the harder because of his baby face. To meet my language requirements for Columbia's Middle Eastern history program, I wound up, for reasons of idiotic university bureaucracy, taking a crash course in Spanish—Spain not being located in the Middle East. It was admittedly preposterous—and Aaron busted my chops about it mercilessly, not just for months or years but for decades, from the Clinton administration right on through to the Trump administration. Eli and Samantha are still beating the crap out of me for it.

Aaron was a spectacular scholar, with an engineer's love of order and system and an academic's love of rigor and reason. His abiding commitment to intense text study and his insistence on high standards sat easily alongside his formidable leadership talents. He was certainly ambitious but never tormented by it, and he would have been perfectly happy as a beloved HUC professor if he hadn't—almost inevitably—become a beloved HUC president.

He had a particular genius with people. "Only connect," wrote E.M. Forster, and Aaron always did. He was deft, compassionate, subtle, calm, steely when necessary, empathic, sure-footed as a mountain goat. Watching him handle a negotiation was a source of constant awe. He was the master of every decision and every situation. He was not only a dear friend, but the head of my informal board of advisers and my most trusted phone call at any major life juncture.

Aaron had a profound commitment to muscular pluralism. He had the confidence in his worldview to grant easy and sweeping respect to anyone willing to engage with an open mind and an open heart. On Wexner, he happily went toe-to-toe on *Gemara* with fellows of all denominations. (I should perhaps mention that he had such a profound impact on Dov Weiss, the one Orthodox rabbinical fellow in our Wexner class, that Dov and his wife Shayndi have just named their new son Zalman Aryeh, with that middle name in Aaron's honor.) Aaron had a deep love of the Reform movement, its values, its mission and its integrity. He was its own best argument, and it's hard to imagine a better refutation of its critics than the depth of his own erudition. Emerson says that institutions are lengthened shadows of people, and HUC-JIR today is a lengthened shadow of Aaron Panken.

I met Aaron Panken when he was on the verge of becoming a father. At Class Eight's orientation in Columbus, Aaron left an exceptionally pregnant Lisa behind in Manhattan. This being the mid-1990s, and Aaron being a gadget nerd, he was hoping to stay in touch with a cellphone the size of a Buick. When our class went out to the Wexner mansion to awkwardly meet Les and Abigail Wexner, the thing was hopelessly out of range, and I vividly remember Aaron looking unusually distracted during the reception. He held up his pointless brick of a phone and ruefully said, "I may already be a father." Within a few weeks, he was, and many of his new Wexner friends were at Eli's bris. I will never forget seeing Aaron, moved and thrilled, speaking about what he called "the miracle of two people falling in love and starting a home." He adored his wife, he adored his children, and they adored him right back.

He was the *m'sader kidushin* at Jenna and my wedding, and he somehow effortlessly took time away from the demands of running a four-campus college-institute to handle it all masterfully. Up under the *huppah* with us and our classmate Angela Buchdahl, Aaron presided with grace and beamed with joy. Afterward, Aaron and Lisa—full service—took our leftover wedding cake home and stored it in their freezer.

Aaron was someone to turn to in hard times too. We all gathered at his and Lisa's apartment the night Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. I called him immediately on the morning of September 11, 2001, as the world was trying to figure out what had happened. I called him when Donald Trump declared that he would ban all Muslims from touching American soil. I called him when my grandfather Joe died, and Aaron—already a dean at HUC—rushed to Toronto on no notice to do the funeral. And I called him from the car from Los Angeles just a few short years ago, driving back from Rami Wernik's funeral.

Part of what's so baffling about this loss, this monstrous loss, is that the person who could have helped us cope with this was Aaron.

The last time I saw Aaron was just a few weeks before he died, when Jenna and I went over to the new apartment in Union Square that they'd just moved into to spare him the stress-inducing commute from Mamaroneck to HUC. It was a Monday night and the apartment was perfect for them. Lisa ordered Thai food, and we gossiped and joked and talked about everything from politics to faith. We brought a bottle of wine, and both Aaron and Lisa—yentas!—noticed that Jenna didn't drink. So, as Jenna pointed out later, the lesson is: Always go for Thai food. Always take time and make time with the ones you love, with the friends who really matter to you. And in fact, I thought Lisa was calling to see if we wanted to come over for impromptu takeout Thai food when she called me on my cellphone on May 5.

When Aaron died, a local newspaper listed his age as 63, not 53. I kept expecting a wry, amused call from Aaron to ask me how a newspaper could possibly screw up so badly. That unthinkably stupid, unforgivable mistake has stuck with me—as a reminder of how little things can add to the pain of a tragedy. But in turn, it reminds me of their converse: of the little things, the little kindnesses, the acts of presence, the unexpected burst of laughter, the unforeseen moment of grace, that can help at least a little to ease the anguish of those in the middle hour of their grief.

So here's the last thing. I lost Aaron Panken when I was on the verge of becoming a father. My last conversation with Aaron took place almost precisely a week before he died, when we called him and Lisa on a Saturday afternoon to let them know that we were expecting. They had of course already guessed—yentas!—from that Monday night with the Thai food. They were in that new apartment closer to HUC, and with his cherished free time, our pillar of the Jewish community was watching a “Star Wars” movie—and a bad one, one of the prequels. It was a suggestion of a new, easier chapter for them. Despite everything that's happened since, I'll always be grateful that we were able to tell him that our little girl was on the way—and I don't know how I could have borne it all if we hadn't been able to let him know.

Our baby girl, Abigail June, is 16-weeks old today. Jenna was about 16-weeks pregnant with her at Aaron's funeral. The A in Abigail is for Aaron. Her *simchat bat* a few weeks ago was held at Lisa and Aaron's apartment. Unlike under our *huppah*, it was just Angela that day and she was wonderful, and everyone still knew it and felt it.

I've found that I've been missing Aaron's wisdom and his bad jokes particularly painfully in these early chapters of fatherhood. More than any other moment in my life, I wish that I could call Aaron and have access to his irreplaceable combination of reverence and irreverence. We hope that our little Abigail will grow up with some of Aaron's warmth, his humanism, his brilliance, his compassion, his moral core and his giant open heart. We hope and we pray for that. But we're just so sorry that she won't get to have her Uncle Aaron.